Are the riders coming? Through the dark? (part three)

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Are the riders coming? Through the dark? (part three)

by Zigzagwanderer

Summary

Will and Hannibal survived the Fall and eventually settled in a Baltic archipelago, under the fake personas of Thom and Eirik Buckley. (See Rhymes of Goodbye for how they got there, Tell Me You'll wait for Me for how they set themselves up, Tomorrow was our Golden Age is about their life on the island). This is my attempt at the story of how Thomas and Eirik met, a fantasy which Will asks Hannibal to tell him as they explore their relationship on their home of Vakkrehejm. Hannibal and Will tell the story together, as it turns out, because they are equal partners now, and after the introductory passages, the body of the tale is them weaving the details together over 'dinner'. (Basically it's all foreplay with them, isn't it?) So there are kind of two 'voices', Hannibal and WIll/as Thom and Eirik. OK? There's even a part four I'm posting later, so put on some coffee.

Notes

Thank you to everyone who is still with me! Guests, named folk and all, you are wonderful. Please feel free to say Hi!, but I don't mind if you don't, I think of you all, all of you little shining stars out in the wider world, with hugs and gratitude, hoping that you enjoy the stories. xxxxxxxx

“Your father owned the yacht club, and so I met him there, and it was as crudely-embellished a bauble as I had feared.

He was at pains to point out that I was only being engaged as a last resort, and that my designing the programmes for the gala would not constitute an invitation to the event itself. But, as the charity involved chanced to be one that I approved of, I agreed to do the work.

He then interrupted our discussion to take a telephone call, so I walked over to the panoramic window. You were already standing there, looking out across the marina, wearing last night’s tuxedo. You were drinking.”

“Thought you were sleazing on over to me. Wouldn’t have been the first time one of Dad’s business associates tried to make a move. Heard you refuse payment for the gig, and make a donation there and then to the sea-bird sanctuary, and although Dad was pissed at nearly everything you said in your fancy voice, that meant squat; there was always so much macho bullshit thrown about in the shark-pool I grew up in, you couldn’t see the bottom for the slime.

Thought everyone I met was just the same, whether they wore old flannels and a sweater, like you, or hand-made deck shoes that had never actually seen a deck, like Dad.

So, anyhow, I glared through the ass-end of my crystal tumbler and rolled my pretty blue eyes. And you, the drawing guy, you’re just staring, as if your mind is truly fucked, at the view.

And that, I think, will be that; no matter how tough they talk, once they see the toys, everyone decides to play.
All those cruisers, white as face-lift scars. Lines of expensive show-pieces with state-of-the-art satellite systems and liveried crews because none of the owners can read a navigation chart worth a damn.
And I said, *“Neat, huh? That one over there’s the Mayor’s.”*”

“And when you pointed, your hand shook.”

“Then I said, *“Take a trip on that motherfucker, and you won’t even know you’re on the Bay.”*”

“You were loud, as if hoping to be overheard, and disapproved of.”

“And you, the nobody drawing guy, you kind of blinked at me, as if I’d called you back from somewhere far away. You clearly could not have given a flying fuck about the Mayor’s boat, because you turned back to the window again, and I realised you were really *looking;* at the cliffs and the rock face above the glossy buildings, and at the gulls that continually crapped on it *all,* and that Dad would merrily exterminate given half a chance and a coupla good ol’ boys with shotguns.

And your eyes. Jesus. I never made eye contact with *anyone* anymore. Not worth it. But yours? I will never fucking forget. Red-gold in the morning sun. *Like* the morning sun."

"*"I was trying to capture the lines of the Bay from this angle,*" I babbled, because you were so very lovely that it put all of my usual sardonic phrases completely out of my head. I rambled on, about the promontory and the shade and the water, until I remembered that I was a middle-aged man, mildly successful at that, and I regained some of my wits. The air around you tasted of whiskey, you were *years* younger than me, and I knew, quite simply, that you would never be in the least interested in what I had to say."

"Actually, what you said next was; *"I have always wished to sketch this side of the headland. The light is more direct, of course, but I was not expecting such a myriad of tones or textures."* Then you shrugged, and I felt how strong you were, underneath that old shirt and sweater, just from how you moved. *"But, this is all private property,"* you said. *"I did not think I would ever get an opportunity.*"

Then you smiled a little, none too kindly, and not at me."

"I was angry, Thom. I had glimpsed something beautiful that circumstances dictated I could never look upon again. The sudden unfairness of it made me uncivil."

"And then you leaned a little closer, and I could smell that cologne you like to wear, and you whispered, *"The view was the only reason I consented to come here and meet this awful man."* And I laughed."

"Yes, Thom." Hannibal kisses Will's cheekbone, kissing down to his mouth, which is, indeed, very lovely. "And then you laughed."

Eirik goes to the gala. For the sake of the sea-birds, of course.

Thom hovers in the lobby of the company building, waiting for Eirik to drop off his final proofs. When Eirik shows, declining an audience with the Big Man himself, happy to entrust his work to a secretary who just *beams* at whatever it is he says to her, Thom cuts in and hands him an invitation.

"Come along," he tempts, to hide his own want, "and I'll double your donation."

The social calendar grinds Thom through another gruelling week of insincerity and insult, until the evening comes around when Eirik steps back into the yacht club.

Thom sees him arrive, alone and in a boring suit; the drawing guy, *Eirik*, is about eighty years out of date.
And he is old Hollywood handsome, far too unconsciously classy for a joint like this, and Thom quickly tells himself that the attraction is just more of the same repetitive rebellion; Thom is not only a failure and a disappointment, he is also a cliché. As he ages, he will

become ridiculous; an ancient, alcoholic, curly-headed playboy, chasing more and more unsuitable men just to further alienate a father who stopped giving a shit years ago.

Thom watches Eirik head to the bar to pay for his own wine. Then he watches Eirik carve a path upward, all god-damn hard jawline and shoulders, to an unpopular balcony that is traditionally too breezy for rich people's hair to deal with.

Eirik, in fact, wishes that he had not come. Does not really know why he did. Although, in fact, he very much does know, exactly, why he came. And he has not deceived himself like *that* for an eternity.

He is uncomfortable, but he can bear the hollowness and the waste. Some of it infuriates him, some of it makes him sad, but, if he is honest, his sorrow is for himself. He is certain he does not enjoy himself as he should. The people around him, for all their profligacy, can wring more delight from a minute of their lives than Eirik can in a year of his. His pleasure is rationed, measured, halting, these days, and he does not know exactly when this became so; surely he was not always so dour, so *circumspect?*

He is becoming a line-drawing of himself; grey and faint and easily erased.

Thom waits twenty-three minutes, which for some unknown fucking reason seems about right, and then seeks Eirik out. He spooks him, actually, and Eirik spills pencils from a canvas pouch that was resting on his knee.

"Shit. I'm sorry. I can buy you more."
It has slipped out before Thom can check it. The reflex of wealth; break and replace.
Eirik tucks his palm-sized sketch-book back into his pocket with faint disappointment.
"Please. There really is no need." Eirik gets up from his secluded spot away from the rest of the party, evidently meaning to leave.

But he is cornered.

"I want…I wanted…to see." Thom swallows. He can't even say why the hell it is so important. "I liked the motif you did on the programmes."

Eirik looks at him.

Again, Thom has never seen anyone *look* at things in such a way. Actually fucking *seeing* them. Actually hungry to deliberately *see* the whole thing, not just take in whatever aspect is least crappy, most convenient. Thom wonders what ugly, ill-fitting things Eirik has seen with those eyes, and whether that means he could stomach Thomas himself, in any capacity.

Eirik hands Thom the sketches, after a few more drinks. A study of stubbly rock-face, thumbnails of individual shadows, weird grids of compositional lines. None of it means a god-damn thing to Thom, but the showing of it means a lot. Eirik explains how he likes to work, not on the bread-and-butter contracts that he needs to stay solvent, but on his own,

private work, and as it gets dark, Thom feels them both toppling from the cliff-top, pressed close together, the wind blowing back the hair from their faces.

They talk for a long time. Until even the shitty plastic bunting is taken down.

And when they part, they are both *terrified*.

Thom waits for a very long twelve hours, which seems, for some unknown fucking reason, to be about right, then he bullshits the telephone number out of his father's secretary and calls Eirik at his studio.

They talk for a very long time. Thom is driven insane by Eirik's accent, even with some kind of orchestra blaring away in the background, and has to crush his eager hand between the table and his elbow to stop himself from acting inappropriately.

They both decide, both bewildered, both elated, to meet for supper.

Eirik is aware that he is cracking, that he has been sledgehammered by this softness, come so unexpectedly into the established solidity of his life, so late in his day.

He lets a perfectly good cup of tea go cold, staring at the telephone in his hand, then distractedly showers before his run. Runs, then has to shower again, feeling guilty for the excessive hot water use.

Feeling guilty because he wants Thom to be misusing the hot water with him.

He glances around his apartment. Notices how he has gradually expunged the human form from his paintings. His love of portraiture has died, because he cannot bear to have a person sit for the hours it takes, in what Eirik fears will be an awkward silence. Detachment has hardened into habit, and his drawings of houses have become entirely vacant of life, uninhabited blueprints of brick upon brick, well-executed yet so very unpalatable. His landscapes have become deserts; devoid of everything but the inorganic.

Connection has become an inconvenience.

And as far as he is aware, reversal of lithification requires an unimaginable amount of heat.

Thom arrives at the restaurant early instead of late, startling the staff into slapstick. They automatically bring a double vodka to the table, but he hands it back. How would that look, for God's sake?

He has overdressed alarmingly, to compensate, he assumes, for his shabby interior. He orders wine, then calls the sommelier back and orders a less expensive vintage.

Then he waves the guy back again and takes the double vodka.

Eirik arrives, and that in itself is a slow seduction for Thom. The steadiness of his coming across the mezzanine, in another fucking *amazingly* out-of-fashion suit, with his face so strikingly *serious*, it just *guts* him.

They talk for a very long time. Until it is late.

“What would you do then, with the rest of your life, if you could choose? If you have never desired to be a captain of industry?” Eirik finally asks, a little drunk, and amused at Thom’s self-deprecating tales of disastrous board meetings and attempts at hiring and firing, most of which ended up the wrong way around.

Thom gets past how Eirik’s mouth shaped the word *desired*, and pauses. No-one has asked him that. Ever. For once, he does not have anything foul-mouthed to say.

“I like to fish,” Thom says slowly. “Not big game. Those boys, out there in the oceans, they’re all brute force and no brain. I like to fish the clever ones, the sly ones, down in the gravel of a river bed someplace.”
Thom feels Eirik’s attention on *him*, the human being covered by the shiny, plasticky, smirking suit he wears, but it isn’t painful, to be undressed and discovered by Eirik. Not at all.
“I tie my own flies,” Thom carries on, “my uptight dressmaker’s doll of a therapist suggested it once, and I took to it. Turns out it’s a craft. Standing in a river. In rubber waders. And a floppy hat.”

Eirik starts to laugh, very softly. Shyly. Like he can’t remember how.

Thom is so turned on he almost forgets to be entertaining. Then he realises he stopped trying hours ago. He punches Eirik on the arm.
“Hey,” he says, smiling back, gently. His knuckles tingle from the contact. “It’s true. Just the quiet of the stream, and me. Y’know, if you’ve been cleverer than the fish, then you get to eat it when you get back home. And, if this is an ideal world we’re talking about, then maybe I’d even have a dog to sit by the fire with.”

Thom is so genuinely wistful, a scion of a fortune, longing for a puppy, that Eirik wants to kiss him. Or more accurately, Eirik wants to act on the urge of the entire evening and kiss him.

But he does not.

Instead he reaches into the pocket of his jacket and drags out his keys. A huge bunch. He can’t remember what many of them unlock. They simply rattle along with him like long-forgotten lovers, forever entombed in some dreadfully cold, many-roomed palace.

He picks one out, disconnects it from the rest and pushes it over to Thom.
“Here," he taps the key. "A cabin. My cabin, I should say. Adjacent to a small town called

Horsetooth. Do you know the National Park at Mourning Hollow?"

"Sounds real cheery."

Now Eirik punches Thom. Neither does anything until the spark from that fades.

"Like you, I had a rather peculiar therapist who suggested it to me once, and, like you, I found the advice surprisingly effective. Good country for trail running, a rural community, getting away from the opera and the too-easily-anonymous life of a city. So, go there, this weekend. With my blessing. Ask Bing and Ruth for directions at the gas station before the big covered bridge. It is extremely basic, and the neighbours are extremely nosy, so it would be no use to you if you were a serial killer, but it has a river, where, I am told, there are many resourceful and muscular fish. Take your rubber boots. Wear your hat."

And think of me, Eirik wants to say. But that would be a mistake.

It is all a mistake, the grey voice inside him scratches in his ear.
So, instead, Eirik leans forward and makes a joke. "I am afraid I cannot yet provide you with a dog."

In their respective beds, later, they both wonder at the word *'yet'*.

So, Thom goes to the forest, and finds the ribboning little settlement along the river, and he tries to trick the smart-assed trout. The cabin is a helluva lot smaller than the holiday homes he is used to, but it has what it needs to have and it is pure heaven because it has little pieces of Eirik all over it. Books and drawings and a few clothes and specialist store cupboard ingredients.

He wraps a cologne-scented blanket around himself, and wants it all.

Wants it to be *theirs*.

Although that is never gonna happen, because judging by the philosophy he reads, Eirik clearly deserves so much better than a piece-of-shit man-child like Thom.
Thom who was made to go to the opera at boarding school and just sat in the bar and drank. Who is well-educated but intellectually lazy, while Eirik worked his way across Europe, schooling himself because he wanted to. Paying his own fucking way.

It is deeply unfortunate, because if Thom were to be asked now what he wants to do with the rest of his life, such a simple yet unusual question for him *to* be asked, he would say that what he wants is to make Eirik smile that underused smile again.
And again. And again. Like one of those *forever* deals he's heard about.

As it is, Thom wonders if even an everyday friendship is possible, when it would inevitably be burdened with such longing.

Eirik, a hundred miles away, drinks tea. He drinks tea and he runs until he should be exhausted, and then, at about three o'clock in the morning, he decides.
When he takes the cabin key back, he will sell the place immediately; he couldn't conceivably go there again.
And he will dispose of the rest, which is not much, and he will retire early from *possibilities*.
And he will find somewhere that he can be as unyielding as the rocks he is now so practised at drawing. Perhaps he can purchase himself an island. Somewhere icy.

And Eirik finds that the idea of living alone, in a little house, of white-painted wood, surrounded by a slate-coloured sea, does not comfort him as it would have done a few short weeks ago.

On the Sunday, as the rain finally washes out his enjoyment of frozen ankles and fish that are not dumb enough to bite, Thom packs up his gear and trudges back between the wet pines towards Horsetooth.
It's a helluva drive back and he has some dates next week he might as well fake his way through.

Eirik did not happen by, and Thom did not really think that he would.

To make his mood even shittier, as he gets into the clearing, Thom sees that there is a second car parked on the packed dirt out front of the cabin.
He thinks then that maybe he shoulda asked Eirik for a note or something, for some proof that he has borrowed the place, that he is rightfully there, no matter how temporarily, seeing as the owner did not intend to be there to vouch for him.

Thom wonders what gossip hacks like Lounds will make of his demise; shot for trespass in a backwater town.
Whether they will be disappointed that it did not involve tequila and a male gymnast.

Then, the door of the cabin opens and Eirik steps out into the rain.
He looks about as undone as Thom has yet seen him, a little wild-eyed, a little passionate. He is clutching one of Thom's sweaty t-shirts in his fists.

Thom is soaked. He drops all his stuff into the mud.
Eirik walks towards him and gets soaked too.

They begin undressing even before they stumble back as far as the porch.

"Jesus Christ," Thom talks to stop himself from crying. "Please tell me that you want me. Please fucking tell me so right now."

Eirik doesn't reply, because he is kissing Thom, but, unlike all of his intellectual books, he realises that the answers are as important as the questions, so he looks at Thom, and says;

"I want you."

And he does; he will want this man until they are nothing but silver and bone.

And afterwards, when they are lying in their bed, in their cabin, when Thom is at least a little convinced that he is wanted, and Eirik is nothing but rubble in his arms, Eirik says,

“Thomas?”

“Yeah?”

And Eirik says, “Please may I draw you now?”

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